

Editorial Introduction: Special Section on older-age migrants and sexualities

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Abstract

Research on migration in older age has been flourishing during the recent years. However, motives and experiences related to love, sexuality and intimacy are still a sensitive desideratum in older-age migration research. The Special Section approaches this gap and encourages interdisciplinary research to further contribute to this field. We argue that older-age migration and sexuality are closely linked concepts that deserve nuanced attention across the broad social sciences themes of inequality, inclusion and self-expression and across diverse geographies.

Keywords

older-age love, older-age sex, older age and migration

Introduction

Old-age migration has developed into a wide field of research over the last decades. Even though there is increasing empirical evidence of how sexuality matters during old-age migration and becomes meaningful for personhood and self-realisation (cf. [Bender and Scheppe, 2022](#); [Christou, 2016](#); [Cvajner 2011, 2019](#); [Cvajner and Sciortino, 2021](#); [King et al., 2017](#)), the topic has not been studied systematically to date. As [Sun \(2021: 13\)](#) rightly argues, migrants, whose lives are crisscrossed with differences and inequalities, ‘rarely take intimacies for granted’. Intimacy and sexuality in older migrant lives are

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constituted and constructed in specific cultural, social and place contexts, which requires a closer look at subjectivities of ageing, migration and sexualities.

This Special Section brings sexuality to the forefront of ageing and migration research. It aims to further theorise the significance and complexity of partnership and sexuality by exploring complex interrelations between older age, sexuality and migration. Sensual empowerment is often not only a crucial dimension of the older person's experiences during their migration process but also becomes one of the motives for migration in older age. Sexual motives for migration are often triggered due to limited options experienced by older people in their countries of origin to correspond to their emotional, sexual and intimate needs and desires. These limitations might be age-related (Bender and Schweppe, 2022) or are linked to certain sexual orientations (Gambold, 2022). Therefore, migration leads to countries which are envisioned to provide a broader scope of freedom and opportunities to satisfy respective lifestyles and needs. As such, older-age migration is linked to new intertwinements of emotional and intimate needs in older age across national borders and is structured by the border-crossing interrelations of desires and resources.

As intimacy and sexualities in older migrant lives are not given but are context-dependent, these cross-border interrelations draw attention to how older migrants (re) make these intimacies in response to structural, social and cultural contexts (Lamb, 2002; Langer, 2009). Inscribed in these contexts are particular meanings of migration and sexuality as well as understandings of ageing and attitudes to sexualities in later life, which are often gender-based. Inscribed are also specific social constructions of 'migrants,' which often go along with processes of 'othering' and the ethnicisation of migrant bodies. These processes impact the options and limitations of experiencing sexualities of older migrants, in addition to their respective individual desires and biographical experiences of sexuality. Drawing on Casey's (2007: 128) thesis that ageism interacts with heterosexism in a double stereotyping, we surmise that social differences of age, ethnicity, gender and migrant status intersect in complex ways that need to be further explored. In the remainder of this introduction, we first examine linkages between older-age migration, sexuality and gender; then, we explore connections between 'othered migrants' due to age and ethnicity and bodily intimacy. Further, we emphasise challenges faced by the ageing generation of LGBTQ+ persons and different forms of sexuality. We conclude with a brief presentation of the contributions to the Special Section.

Older-age migration, sexualities and gender

Social constructions of chronological age have changed over time along with the blurring of boundaries between different ages. They are context-dependent. Migration and gender research shows that women may feel considerably younger due to economic empowerment and, notably, by being sexually desired (Lulle and King, 20016a; Tiaynen-Qadir, 2016) in one country but not in another. Moving away from cultures where female and male bodies are considered 'old' as early as in their midlife can lead to extended options to experience sexualities; either they have moved initially for work purposes or have found

partners who see their ageing and gendered bodies as attractive and desired (Bender and Schweppe, 2022; Lulle and King, 2016b).

However, age remains a powerful social control mechanism that further intersects with gendered control exerted on migrants in different social and cultural contexts. Hence, there is a need to revisit and challenge such stereotypical perceptions and tropes in everyday life and academic writing. For instance, while widespread stereotyping of mixed-age partnerships often stigmatises older women who date a younger man and older 'sugar daddies' are often portrayed as predatory men, young women who partner with older men may see them as respectable and patrons for enabling their lives (Hunter, 2012: 73; Parikh, 2004).

Older-age migration, sexualities and ethnicisation

The ethnicisation and stigmatisation of migrants intersect with ageism in multiple ways. The persisting ethnicisation of migrant bodies operates across the lifecourse, but we know very little about how ethnicised older bodies are sexualised. Nagel (2003: 10), who coined the term ethno-sexual, has demonstrated that ethnicity and sexuality intersect, interact and depend one on the other and may lead to stigmatisation. However, conditions stigmatising older persons and migrants are 'fuzzy' (Hsu et al., 2004: 185), meaning that they are distorted through varied racial, ethnic and bio-social 'lenses'. For example, the 'othering' of the perceptions of sexualised *older* bodies is often related to *ethnicity*, such as Eastern European or Asian care providers (Derks, 2004) touching older 'Western' bodies they care for in haptic experiences (Paterson, 2007), which can evoke a sexual desire for those who are cared for.

Further, access to sex and expression of sexuality can be narrowed down through the well-known 'double jeopardy' thesis (Dowd and Bengston, 1978), namely that ageing and being a migrant lead to more challenges than being a younger migrant or an ageing 'local' person. Here, of course, we must emphasise the large difference between what is called the 'third age' – healthy, relatively free from work duties and sexually active, and the 'fourth age,' when serious health problems and body frailty shape daily lives. Conversely, ethnicised and ageing 'lenses' can privilege and exoticise certain ethnicities, for example, healthy and work-free 'third age' Westerners who are stereotyped and also celebrated in popular culture (e.g. Blue, 2000). However, we warn against superficial celebration of such experiences as general because many, if not most ageing migrants may not be wealthy pleasure-seekers, or their sexual attractiveness is impeded through ethnicisation and racialisation.

Older-age migration and different forms of sexualities

Mobility has been recognised as one of the ways in which sexual minorities have escaped repression or pursued greater autonomy as self-expression of ageing masculinities and femininities in more welcoming cultural contexts. This is because migration can change interlinkages between old age and sexual desire because people move across physical and cultural borders, and experience their older age, and express their sexuality differently

(Donnan and Magowan, 2010: 69). Segal (2013: 99) argues that sexual passion is never spent in old age. However, whatever ageing body fragilities exist, sexual desires vary greatly from looks, touch, and fantasy to active sexual life. Like Segal, Giddens (1992) shows that different forms of desires are responsive to socio-political, cultural and intimate contexts, situations, and environments, which can trigger fluidity. While different forms of sexuality are fluid in cultural and spatial contexts of older age, heterosexuality, too, needs to be and is constantly produced even in the most mundane encounters (Johnson 2005). For example, for the first generation of LGBTQ+ individuals who are now ageing, research shows that their migration as they age is guided not only by desire, but also by safety and inclusion motivations to be in spaces where sensuality and sexuality are accepted and included (Casey, 2007). Hence, research on older-age migration and sexuality should further a concept of sexual citizenship both in LGBTQ+ and heterosexual partnerships (Cossman, 2007) and within broader societal changes with increasing transnational connections and transformations of intimacy (Giddens, 1992).

The role of place, including its regulatory regimes, plays overall an important role for migration, older age and different forms of sexualities. Ageing as couples in countries where their coupledness is not legally recognised poses significant challenges for the respective actors in an unequal world (Westwood, 2016) and highly relevant theoretical and practical tasks to tackle unequal sexual rights (Suen, 2022). Whilst LGBTQ+ persons can rely on globalised support via social media to some extent (Lennes, 2021), hands-on care, sensual socialisation and navigation in heteronormative spaces in older age brings along severe challenges which act as powerful motivations to migrate (Willis et al., 2018). In the meantime, while some migrants dream about return migration in old age, such aspirations for many LGBTQ+ persons may not come to fruition due to discrimination in 'home' countries, as experiences confirm by some of those who have returned (see Alcalde, 2019 in case of Peru).

Key contributions of the Special Section papers

Cvanjer and Sciortino (2021) explore how the sexual status of middle-aged and ageing Eastern European women changed when they migrated to Italy. The authors demonstrate, with ethnographic nuance, how women learned to interpret their sexual selves in novel ways. Importantly, sexuality and erotic qualities attributed to age permeate almost all domains of migrancy, including their settlement decisions in Italy. Eroticism and age are sharply gendered and spatially differentiated: whilst women thought of themselves as undesirable due to their age 'back home', they re-discovered their erotic selves and, moreover, perceived older 'local' men as desirable precisely because of their older age.

Näre and Diatlova (2020) provide innovative accounts of how ethnicised migrant women interact with bodies in eldercare and sex work. Migrant women have unequal power to negotiate intimacy and bodywork in the paid care sector, where they have to touch bodies in what the industry of old-age care perceives in a rather mechanistic and medicalised way. However, these ageing bodies revive as sexual bodies and long for a caring, sensual touch. Conversely, in paid sex work, migrant women can choose whose bodies they want to touch.

Gambold (2022) provides a powerful testimony of the first generation of LGBT retirees and analyses why migration is crucial in older age to maintain and nurture lifestyle, safety and sensuality. Gambold explores these quests for retirement communities and LGBT-focused housing. She demonstrates that migration is not escapism or amenity-seeking for these individuals and couples. Hence, Gambold makes a relevant contribution to emerging literature on older-age migration, sexuality and lifestyle. Preserving sexual authenticity and establishing intimate relationships in older age is no less critical than in the youthful stages of life. Moreover, safety in expressing one's sexuality becomes more important in older age.

Taken together, these contributions have illuminated how migration enables older people to reinterpret their sexual 'selves', how body work in the care sector and sex work open up novel understandings of encounters between an ethnicised migrant and ageing 'local' bodies, and how the LGBT retirees seek to age in sexuality and ageing-friendly places and communities. Much more work must be done to move beyond limited Western concepts (Dune et al., 2015) of sexuality for ageing migrants from diverse cultures.

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